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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a time when individuals are trying to establish a sense of personal identity. This study compared the self-image of Iranian-American adolescents with those in a normative American sample so as to determine whether or not growing up with two cultures hinders the development of adolescents' self-image. The subjects were 150 (75 male, 75 female) first-generation, Iranian-American adolescents ages 13 to 18, who were either born in or had lived in the United States for more than 10 years. These adolescents lived in large urban areas and 80 percent of them had grade point averages of 3.0 or higher. Participants answered demographic questions and a self-image questionnaire. Results showed that the Iranian-American adolescents had significantly lower total self-image scores than the normative sample. Likewise, participants' scores on a family functioning sub-scale were also significantly lower than the normative sample. The poorer self-image of the study group could be partly due to the conflicts between child rearing practices and cultural expectations of each culture. Educators should note that students who are doing well in school may still suffer from a poor self-image. Contains 98 references. (RJM)

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The Self-Image of Adolescent Immigrants: The Case of Iranian-American Adolescents

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OBJECTIVES

Adolescence is the stage of development in which an individual seeks to establish a sense of personal identity; failure to do so leads to identity confusion and poor self image (Erikson, 1950). The objective of this study was to compare the self-image of Iranian-American adolescents with Offer's (1988) normative American sample to determine if growing up with two cultures puts a strain on the development of self-image of adolescents. In studies of adolescents in ten countries, (Offer, Ostrov, Howard, Atkinson, 1988) it has been found that for most adolescents living in their homeland, the search for identity results in a positive self-image. However, researchers who have used Offer's questionnaire to study immigrant and ethnic minorities found that the adolescents of these populations did not always fare well in their search for a positive self-image (Luke, 1989; Rosenthal, Moore & Taylor, 1983). None of these studies included Iranian-American adolescents who face the challenge of maintaining their ethnic and cultural identity while growing up in the United States.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Erikson suggests that identity development is not an entirely individual process; it is also a product of one's relations with family, friends, and community members (1975). In order to have a secure sense of self, adolescents must resolve their identities in both individual and social spheres. Adolescents growing up as members of an ethnic minority group have a dual task: they must resolve the psycho-social challenge that all adolescents face in forming an identity, and they must find resolutions for the mixed messages they receive about who they are and how they should behave from the minority and majority cultures (Marcia, 1966; Phinney, 1989).

Studies on adolescent immigrant identity demonstrate the disadvantages that many different ethnic minorities face while growing up. The study by Rosenthal, Moore, and Taylor (1983), of Italian-Australian adolescents living in Australia and Luke's (1989) study of Chinese-American adolescents living in the U.S. both found that immigrant adolescents from these ethnic groups had a lower self-image when compared to the native sample.

A study by Hoffman explored how Iranian immigrants in the U.S. adjust to the new culture. Using in-depth interviews with Iranian-American adolescents and adults living in the Los Angeles area, she (1990) found that subjects had two distinct aspects to their self-image. One was a deep personal Iranian identity. The second was a social identity that allowed them to adopt American social lifestyles. The two identities were not integrated. On the surface these Iranian Americans appeared to be successfully adapting to life in the United States, succeeding in school, attaining advanced degrees, and entering professionally lucrative jobs. However, many of them could not imagine ever being American. The disparity between their Iranian personal identity and their American social identity did not appear to disturb many of her subjects. For others, the discrepancy caused difficulties that led to feelings of alienation, personal conflict, and anxiety.

Much of the difficulty Iranian immigrants face in establishing a positive self-image can be traced to cultural differences in the way individuals relate to their families. For Iranians,

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the most important interpersonal relationship is between the individual and the extended family; individual needs and aspirations play a secondary role to the family's expectations (Ansari, 1988; Ghaffarian, 1989). In contrast, in the United States, achieving individual goals and aspirations is often more important than meeting family needs (Triandis, 1988). Iranian children are taught to respect and obey their elders' views (Ghaffarian, 1989), while American children are expected to have individual views and to express their own opinions, even at an early age. These differences in childrearing practices can cause friction for Iranian-American families.

The review of the literature on the self-image of adolescent immigrants led to two hypotheses: 1) the self-image of Iranian-American adolescents would be lower than the self-image of American adolescents on Offer's Self-Image Questionnaire (OSIQ); and 2) Iranian-American adolescents would score lower than American adolescents on the family functioning sub-scale of that same instrument.

METHOD

Subjects: The subjects were 150 (75 male, 75 female) first generation Iranian-American adolescents, aged 13 to 18, who were either born in or had lived in the United States for more than 10 years. These adolescents were drawn from large Iranian communities in the Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. metropolitan areas and were recruited at public high schools as well as at Iranian community centers. Most of the subjects reported coming from two parent families. More than 60 percent of their parents have college degrees,many have obtained higher degrees. About one-third of the parents have combined household incomes of $70,000 or more. More than three quarters of the students in the sample identified themselves as Iranian rather than Iranian-American or American. Most of them reported speaking Persian to their parents and especially their grandparents, but most of them used English with their siblings. These students indicated that they were doing well in school. Of the study group 80 percent of the students were maintaining grade point averages of 3.0 or above. They also had set high career goals for themselves: about 60 percent were interested in becoming doctors or lawyers.

Procedure: After obtaining consent forms from the subjects and their parents, the students answered several demographic questions about themselves and their families and then completed the Revised Form of a 129-item Offer Self-Image Questionnaire (OSIQ). The instrument's reliability is .90 according to Cronbach's coefficient alpha and its validity as a cross-cultural measure of self-image has been empirically supported (Offer, 1981). The questionnaire included questions in 12 areas: emotional tone, impulse control, mental health, social functioning, family functioning, vocational attitudes, self-confidence, self-reliance, body image, sexuality, ethical values, and idealism.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Both hypotheses of this study were statistically significant: 1)the Iranian-American adolescents had significantly lower total self-image scores on the OSIQ than Offer's normative sample, and 2) the Iranian-American scores on the family functioning sub-scale were significantly lower than the normative sample. The findings were the same across age and sex. In fact, the Iranian- American adolescents scored lower than the normative sample on every one of the OSIQ subscales.

The task of identity formation is difficult for all adolescents who come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. These adolescents must search for and develop a personal identity as well as find a social identity that is accepted in two differing social worlds. The Iranian-American adolescents in this study have a lower self-image than their American

peers because they not only face the challenges that all individuals confront during the adolescence, but they also encounter the task of identifying with and accommodating to two different cultures.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Teachers and counselors often concentrate their time and efforts on students whose needs for help is more overt: those whose families cannot provide adequate care for them; students who are failing in school, who do not have clear career goals, or who lack skills that employers demand. Alternately, educators often presume that students who are doing well in school, who are goal directed and well prepared to enter lucrative careers, and who have caring, involved, financially secure families, must feel good about themselves, and thus require and desire nothing from the school or community to improve their self-image. This study refutes this general assumption.

This study of Iranian-American adolescents reveals that for many ethnic and cultural minority groups, meeting the expectations of the dominant society does not bring with it a positive self-image. The poorer self-image of Iranian-American adolescents appears to be partly due to the conflicts between childrearing practices and cultural expectations of each culture. This study hopes to alert educators to these conflicts as well as to help immigrant populations support their adolescents through a search for identity, a search more likely to lead to a positive self-image by balancing ethnic cultural values while living within the cultural norms of the dominant culture.

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